Principles of War

Principles of war have taken many forms and have been viewed differently by various military communities and scholars.

> To some a principle was a law that demanded certain actions. To some it was a prevailing condition that always led to success in war. To others it was a general truth, an element, or a fundamental inherent in the nature of war, and to still others, a principle was a guide that could sometimes be violated but always had to be considered.[1]

Some urge that codified principles of war be abandoned, while others would enshrine them as a road map to success in war. Neither view is entirely appropriate. The first view ignores the principles' educational and guiding influence, and the second tends to abuse them as some sort of recipe that supplants initiative, improvisation, and judgment. All of the principles are interrelated and interacting elements of warfare. They are not separate and distinct entities from which a commander selects when employing forces. Put in perspective, the principles of war help provide a better understanding of warfare, but they are not a series of checklist items that necessarily lead to success. The principles are important to the understanding and mastery of warfare, but professional expertise requires a depth of knowledge far beyond mere principles.[2]

Nine Principles

Although Sun Tzu presented principles of war about 500 B.C., and numerous authors wrote about principles of war in the eighteenth and especially in the nineteenth centuries, modern codification of the principles of war was accomplished by Col J. F. C. Fuller in 1916. In addition to eight "strategical principles," Fuller also presented three "tactical principles"—demoralization, endurance, and shock. In 1920 the British army adopted Fuller's strategic principles. The following year the US Army listed these eight principles, plus the principle of simplicity, in War Department Training Regulation 10-5, *Doctrine, Principles, and Methods.* Although various principles have been

added and subtracted over the intervening years, the list we have today is essentially the 1921 US Army list (movement is now called maneuver and cooperation is now called unity of command). This list of principles of war is not immutable, nor does it correspond in detail with the principles of war used by other nations.[3]

Objective—*Direct military operations toward a defined and attainable objective that contributes to strategic, operational, or tactical aims.*[4] The military objective of a nation at war must be to apply whatever degree of force is necessary to attain the political purpose for which the war is being fought. Strategic, operational, and tactical objectives can be clearly identified and developed only when the political purpose has been determined and defined by the national command authorities (NCA). Thus, when the political purpose is the total defeat of the adversary, the strategic military objective will most likely be the defeat of the enemy's armed forces and the destruction of his will to resist.

Offensive—*Act rather than react and dictate the time, place, purpose, scope, intensity, and pace of operations. The initiative must be seized, retained, and fully exploited.* The principle of the offensive suggests that offensive action, or maintaining the initiative, is the most effective and decisive way to pursue and to attain a clearly defined goal. This aspect of the principle is fundamentally true at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. Although it may sometimes be necessary to adopt a defensive posture, this posture should be only temporary until the necessary means are available to resume offensive operations. An offensive spirit must be inherent in the conduct of all defensive operations—the defense must be active, not passive.

Offensive action, whatever form it takes, is the means by which the nation or armed forces capture and hold the initiative, maintain freedom of action, and achieve results. It permits political leaders or military commanders to capitalize on the initiative, impose their will on the enemy, set the terms and select the place of confrontation or battle, exploit vulnerabilities, and react to rapidly changing situations and unexpected developments. No matter what the level of war, the

side that retains the initiative through offensive action forces the enemy to react rather than to act.

Mass—*Concentrate combat power at the decisive time and place*. At the strategic level of war, this principle suggests that the nation should commit, or be prepared to commit, a preponderance of national power to those regions or areas where the threat to vital security interests is greatest. Accurate and timely determination of where the threat to vital national interests is greatest is difficult. In today's volatile world, the nature and sources of threats often change in dramatic fashion. Since every possible contingency or trouble spot cannot be anticipated, much less planned for, planners and forces must retain flexibility of thought and action. At the operational level, this principle suggests that superior combat power must be concentrated at the decisive time and place to achieve decisive results.

Economy of Force—*Create usable mass by using minimum combat power on secondary objectives. Make fullest use of all forces available*.[5] As a reciprocal of the principle of mass, economy of force at the strategic level of war suggests that, in the absence of unlimited resources, a nation may have to accept some risks in areas where vital national interests are not immediately at stake. Since the NCA should focus predominant power toward a clearly defined primary objective, they cannot allow attainment of that objective to be compromised by diversions to areas of lower priority. Economy of force involves risks, requires astute strategic planning and judgment by political and military leaders, and again places a premium on the need for flexibility of thought and action.

At the operational level, the principle of economy of force requires that minimum means be employed in those areas where the main effort is not to be made. It requires, as at the strategic level, the acceptance of prudent risks in selected areas to achieve superiority in the area where decision is sought. Thus, economy of force may require forces in a particular area to attack, defend, or delay or to conduct deception operations, depending on the importance of the area.

Maneuver—*Place the enemy in a position of disadvantage through the flexible application of combat power*. In the strategic

sense, this principle has three interrelated dimensions: flexibility, mobility, and maneuverability. The first of these involves the need for flexibility in thought, plans, and operations. Such flexibility enhances the ability to react rapidly to unforeseen circumstances. The second dimension involves strategic mobility, which is especially critical in reacting promptly to concentrate and project power against the primary objective. The final strategic dimension involves maneuverability within a theater to focus maximum strength against enemy weakness and thereby gain strategic advantage.

In a theater of operations, maneuver is an essential element of combat power. It contributes significantly to sustaining the initiative, to exploiting success, to preserving freedom of action, and to reducing vulnerability. The object of maneuver is to concentrate or to disperse forces in a manner designed to place the enemy at a disadvantage, thus achieving results that would otherwise be more costly in men and materiel.

At all levels of war, successful application of this principle requires not only fire and movement but also flexibility of thought, plans, and operations and the considered application of the principles of mass and economy of force. Maneuver is the means by which the commander sets the terms for battle, declines battle, or acts to take advantage of tactical actions.

Unity of Command—*Ensure unity of effort for every objective under one responsible commander*. This principle emphasizes that all efforts should be directed and coordinated toward a common goal. At the strategic level of war, this common goal equates to national political purposes and the broad strategic objectives that flow from them. The common goal at the strategic level determines the military forces necessary for its achievement. To develop full combat power, these forces must be coordinated through unity of effort. Coordination may be achieved by cooperation; it is, however, best achieved by vesting a single commander with the requisite authority to direct all forces employed in pursuit of a common goal.

In the United States, the president is the commander in chief of the armed forces and, at the strategic level, is assisted in this role by the

secretary of defense and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Combatant commanders contribute to attaining national objectives by achieving theater and subtheater goals.

Security—*Protect friendly forces and their operations from enemy actions which could provide the enemy with unexpected advantage*. Security enhances freedom of action by reducing friendly vulnerability to hostile acts, influence, or surprise. Security measures, however, should not be allowed to interfere with flexibility of thought and action, since rigidity and dogmatism increase vulnerability to enemy surprise. In this regard, detailed staff planning and thorough understanding of enemy strategy, tactics, and doctrine can improve security and reduce vulnerability to surprise.

At the strategic level of war, security requires that active and passive measures be taken to protect the nation and its armed forces against espionage, subversion, and strategic intelligence collection. Campaigns depend on security of forces and security of plans for success. At the operational and tactical levels, security results from the measures taken by a command to protect itself from surprise, observation, detection, interference, espionage, sabotage, and harassment. Security may be achieved by establishing and maintaining protective measures against hostile acts or influence, or it may be assured by deception operations designed to confuse and dissipate enemy attempts to interfere with the forces being secured.

Surprise—*Strike the enemy at a time or place or in a manner for which he is unprepared*. To a large degree, the principle of surprise is the reciprocal of the principle of security. Concealing one's capabilities and intentions creates the opportunity to strike the enemy when he is unaware or unprepared, but strategic surprise is difficult to achieve. Rapid advances in strategic surveillance technology make it increasingly difficult to mask or cloak large-scale marshaling or movement of personnel and equipment. Still, rapid deployment of combat forces into a crisis area can forestall or upset the plans and preparations of an enemy.

Surprise is important for the joint force for it can decisively affect the outcome of battles. With surprise, success out of proportion to the

effort expended may be obtained. Surprise results from going against an enemy in a time, place, or manner for which he is unprepared. It is not essential that the enemy be taken unaware, but only that he become aware too late to react effectively. Factors contributing to surprise include speed and quickness, employment of unexpected factors, effective intelligence, deception operations of all kinds, variations of tactics and methods of operation, and operations security.

Simplicity—*Avoid unnecessary complexity in preparing, planning, and conducting military operations*. Guidance, plans, and orders should be as simple and direct as attainment of the objective will allow. At the national level, the strategic importance of the principle of simplicity extends well beyond its more traditional military application. It is an important element in the development and enhancement of public support. Political and military objectives and operations must therefore be presented in clear, concise, and understandable terms.

In its military application, this principle promotes strategic flexibility by encouraging broad guidance rather than detailed and involved instruction. At the joint-force level, simplicity of plans and instructions contributes to successful operations. Direct, simple plans and clear, concise orders are essential in reducing misunderstanding and confusion. A simple plan executed properly and promptly may be preferable to a complex plan executed later.

Additional Principles

Obviously, one can formulate principles of war in addition to the nine used by the Air Force today. For example, John Alger presents a 68-entry chronological compendium of principles of war from the time of Sun Tzu through 1978.[6] As recently as the 1984 edition of AFM 1-1, *Basic Aerospace Doctrine of the United States Air Force*, the Air Force listed the principles of timing and tempo, logistics, and cohesion.[7] Although these concepts are important considerations in

war, they do not have the weight of authority lent by familiarity with those codified in the 1920s.

Apart from candidates for addition to the principles of war are proposals for "principles of deterrence." Robert H. Reed and John M. Collins, among others, have proposed such principles, maintaining that deterrence differs so basically from war fighting that it requires separate principles. Reed proposes: credibility of means, credibility of will, clarity of intent, controllability, flexibility, negotiation, unity of effort, economy of effort, and interdependence.[8] Collins proposes: preparedness, nonprovocation, prudence, publicity, credibility, uncertainty, paradox, independence, change, and flexibility.[9] Both of these proposals are criticized in the July–August 1980 edition of the *Air University Review.*[10]

Conclusion

The so-called principles of war merely represent generally accepted "truths" that have proven effective for commanders employing forces in combat. Theory, of course, is no substitute for military genius or even for professional judgment. The complex nature of war in general and the unique character of each war in particular prohibit using the principles of war as a checklist to assure successful military operations. They cannot substitute for initiative and improvisation; rather, they offer a conceptual framework within which to evaluate possible actions.

Notes

1. For an excellent historical account of the principles of war, see John I. Alger, *The Quest for Victory: The History of the Principles of War* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), 189.

2. Carl von Clausewitz, who was averse to systematizing military theory into so-called principles of war, warns of the inherent danger of relying upon them, especially on the battlefield. Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael E. Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), chaps. 2 through 4 of bk. 2. For the utility of the principles of war, see Jay Luvaas, "Military History: Is It Still Practicable?" *Parameters*, March 1982, 2–14; see also Lt Col Richard M. Swain, "On Bringing Back the Principles of War," *Military Review*, November

1980, 40–46, which presents a helpful approach to battle/campaign analysis that uses the principles of war as a tool. Col George M. Hall, "A Field Expedient for the Principles of War," *Military Review*, March 1983, 34–42, presents four "practical" rules (based on combinations of the nine principles of war) which, he maintains, can be used as a sort of battlefield decision tree.

3. Alger, especially for Fuller's contribution, 113–25, 187–88, and 232–33.

4. The explanation of this and the eight principles that follow is based, almost verbatim, on Joint Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, 1 February 1995, A-1 through A-3.

5. Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959), 26.

> The term "economy of force," . . . derives from an interpretation governed by the nineteenth century connotation of the word "economy," meaning judicious management but not necessarily limited use. Thus, the violation of the indicated principle is suggested most flagrantly by a failure to use to good military purpose forces that are available. Of late, however, the term has often been interpreted as though it demanded "economizing" of forces, that is, a withholding of use.

6. Alger, 195–270.

7. AFM 1-1, *Basic Aerospace Doctrine of the United States Air Force*, 16 March 1984, 2-8 through 2-10.

8. Col Robert H. Reed et al., "On Deterrence: A Broadened Perspective," *Air University Review*, May–June 1975, 2–17.

9. John M. Collins, "Principles of Deterrence," *Air University Review*, November–December 1979, 17–26.

10. "Commentary," *Air University Review*, July–August 1980, 77–84.